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FOR A/S CARSON FROM THE AMBASSADOR

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TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KE](#)

SUBJECT: PUSHING REFORMS: THE NATIONAL YOUTH FORUM AND
GOVERNMENT REACTION

REF: NAIROBI 1811

Classified By: AMBASSADOR MICHAEL E. RANNEBERGER for REASONS 1.4 (B) and (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. Sixty-six independent youth organizations across the country are planning, with our support and encouragement, to hold a National Youth Forum on November 17 to focus on the reform agenda and national reconciliation. The government feels threatened by such independent activity) particularly that it is drawing youth from every constituency in the country -- and our support for it. The President and senior Ministers raised this with me, and I responded (see para 11). The National Youth Forum will take place in a context in which youth across ethnic and political lines are making clear their support for reform and change. This growing awareness and the Forum will help drive domestic-driven pressure for action. End summary.

¶2. (C) As part of our broad efforts to propel implementation of the reform agenda (to which the coalition government committed itself) we have been seeking to encourage peaceful domestic-driven pressure. A key element of this is expanded outreach to youth, who constitute two-thirds of the population. (See reftel and previous on overall strategy framework and actions.) That outreach has involved meetings with young people around the country and expanded support to independent grassroots youth organizations through USAID,s Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), among other efforts.

¶3. (C) In September my team and I met with six prominent youth leaders to float the idea of our supporting youth organizations to hold a National Youth Forum to focus on the reform agenda and national reconciliation. At that meeting, the activists indicated that plans were already underway to hold a national youth congress, along lines similar to those we were suggesting. As a result of subsequent discussions between the youth activists and my team, the youth activists decided to expand the scope of the national meeting to include bringing together young people from throughout the nation. With our technical support, the youth activists reached out to over 60 other youth organizations and developed a plan of action to hold a National Youth Forum on November 17. The 66 youth organizations plan to mobilize about 600 young people (including 2 representatives from each of Kenya,s 210 parliamentary constituencies) for a full-day event at the Kenyatta International Conference Center (KICC) in Nairobi. We agreed to provide financial support through OTI.

¶4. (C) At the end of my November 2 meeting with President Kibaki to deliver the letter from President Obama (septel), Kibaki raised for a couple of minutes in a general way our involvement with youth, saying vaguely that it had raised some concerns. Before a discussion could take place, the President,s permanent secretary Muthaura jumped in to say the President had another meeting, and the President left the room. Muthaura then told me that some of the government Ministers wanted to talk with me. Minister of Security Saitoti, FM Wetangula, and Deputy Prime Minister Mudavadi came into the room along with some other officials. They

were entirely focused on the planned National Youth Forum. In essence, they described such youth activities as &unhelpful& and warned that &troublemakers& could seek to disrupt the meeting. I pushed back hard, acknowledging U.S. support for the meeting, but making clear that the agenda and participation were being organized by the youth organizations. I emphasized that the meeting would be peaceful and made clear I did not appreciate the veiled threat through the reference to &troublemakers.& In fact, I noted, if as it claims the government is committed to reform then it should embrace the meeting. On November 9 I sent a letter (cleared by Washington) to those involved in the meeting making clear the parameters of our engagement with youth as part of broader efforts to encourage implementation of reforms (see text in para 11).

15. (C) Our outreach to youth and the holding of the National Youth Forum come at a time when there is widespread recognition that youth throughout the country are increasingly frustrated with lack of reform, which they correctly link to insufficient efforts to alleviate poverty and to empower youth economically and politically. This broadening realization of the need for change is driving youth to work together across ethnic, religious, and political lines (but also driving the potential to cause instability and violence if youth activism is not channeled peacefully within the democratic system). All of the 66 youth organizations involved in organizing the National Youth Forum are inter-ethnic, and represent all the political constituencies in the country.

16. (C) The fact that youth are increasingly asking politicians hard questions and that they are increasingly resistant to manipulation greatly threatens the political

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class. The increasing activism of youth is one of the most important dynamics at play to threaten the edifice of the culture of impunity. That the political class (as reflected by those in the meeting with me) is so threatened by a meeting of several hundred youth indicates that this edifice may be weaker and less resilient than anyone suspects. While another message will analyze the broader state of the reform process and U.S. efforts, it is worth noting here that the political class which continues to resist reforms is clearly reeling under steadily increasing pressure from the U.S., from Kofi Annan, from Ocampo, and to a lesser extent from the EU. Most importantly, that external pressure is encouraging growing domestic pressure for implementation of reforms, and thus the government's negative reaction to the National Youth Forum. The external and internal pressure is also yielding some results (as in the commitment to police reform, among other steps).

17. (C) On November 10 I received a call from FM Wetangula in response to my letter about engagement with you. He told me that &I cannot disagree with anything in your letter,& but emphasized that &the government& still did not want the National Youth Forum to take place. When I pushed back he admitted that the youth organizations had a right to meet. He asked me to engage again with the Minister of Youth before the Youth Forum takes place, which I agreed to do (and had already planned to do). I had already met earlier this week with the two Assistant Ministers of Youth to make clear our interest in partnering with the government on youth activities while also working directly with youth organizations.

18. (C) During the night of November 9 the offices of DAI (which is OTI's primary contractor providing the funding and support to the youth organizations for the holding of the Forum) were burglarized. In what was clearly a targeted operation, only 3 laptops containing information related to the National Youth Forum were taken (despite the presence of much expensive equipment and valuables). The RSO is involved and a police report has been filed. The operation has the hallmarks of the National Security and Intelligence Service, which is often used to intimidate civil society activists. (When I met with PM Odinga on November 3 on other issues, I raised the concerns expressed by Ministers in the November 2

meeting. Odinga said Mudavadi, Odinga's ally, had been pressured into attending and that he, Odinga, was not opposed to the holding of the Forum. He claimed that National Security and Intelligence Service Director Gichangi) whose stature with Kibaki has been damaged by a number of missteps) is poisoning Kibaki's ear about U.S. efforts to promote reform, alleging that the U.S. is stimulating pressure rather than telling Kibaki the truth that he might not want to hear, which is that there is growing grassroots domestic pressure.)

¶9. (C) On November 5 I met with the youth committee representing the organizations setting up the National Youth Forum. I relayed the comments which President Kibaki and then the Ministers had made to me. I made clear to the committee that it was entirely up to them whether or not to proceed with the Forum, but that they had to be alert to the real possibility of state-sponsored intimidation or attempts to have troublemakers disrupt the event. The committee made clear that the youth organizations had already anticipated such possibilities, that precautions have been taken, and they are determined to proceed. They indicated that I and other diplomatic colleagues would be invited to observe part of the proceedings, and I agreed to encourage my counterparts to respond positively.

¶10. (C) The National Youth Forum, if held successfully, will raise the profile of youth initiatives to push for reform, will have a quantum impact in stimulating independent youth efforts across the country and across ethnic and political lines, and help galvanize domestic-driven pressure for change. That said, the political class and vested interests feel very threatened by such independent activity, and there is serious potential for further intimidation. The youth organizations are well-organized, have taken into account these issues, and are doing their utmost to ensure that the Forum is a model of peaceful democratic deliberation. The media will likely give prominent coverage to the event.

¶11. (U) Begin text of my letter to Mudavadi, Saitoti, Wetangula, and Muthaura; the letter was also copied to the Prime Minister:

I am writing to follow up on our November 2 discussion in which you expressed concerns about certain of my Mission's activities related to youth.

The U.S. Mission in Nairobi has for many, many years been engaged in supporting youth activities in Kenya. We have previously sponsored national youth meetings, supported micro-enterprise projects for youth, provided capacity-building training, offered scholarships, provided health assistance targeting the growing problem of HIV

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infections among youth, and facilitated exchange visits to the United States, to name just a few areas.

We remain engaged in a wide array of such activities. Some of these efforts involve supporting grassroots youth organizations that are working to promote implementation of the reform agenda. Since the coalition government has made clear that it intends to implement fully and expeditiously Agenda Four, and because the United States has repeatedly committed to support this, what we are doing constitutes a vital part of our bilateral partnership.

I thus find expressions of concern about such activities surprising. As I made clear to you, in all contacts I and my team have with youth) publicly and privately) we emphasize the need for any activity to be peaceful and to take place with full respect for the rule of law. We emphasize the need to work within the democratic system as well as with relevant government agencies and ministries. We also urge the need for national reconciliation and state emphatically that there can be no place for violence. All of our activities are fully transparent. Provincial Commissioners, District Officers, and the local chiefs are almost always present at meetings which I or

officers of my Mission hold (whether with youth or others) during travel around the country. In many instances, my meetings with youth and others are co-hosted with government officials. I also routinely invite Members of Parliament to join me in such visits and discussions.

It is a very positive sign for Kenya's democracy that independent grassroots youth organizations are developing throughout the country and are working peacefully across ethnic and political lines to urge and support change through implementation of the reform agenda, and to promote national reconciliation.

I am sure you agree that in a democratic state, the government must not and should not seek to control the activities and associational life of civil society, be they youth, religious, women, business, or others. That said, it is of course appropriate and necessary for the government to seek to assist youth and other segments of society as they endeavor to contribute to the life of the nation. I commend the government for the initiatives it has undertaken, ranging from creation of the Ministry of Youth and Sports, to expansion of the National Youth Service, to establishment of the National Youth Fund, to creation of the Kazi Kwa Vijana Fund, to cite only some of the government's efforts with regard to youth.

My government is in the process of developing plans regarding a new \$45 million initiative for engagement with youth. This program was outlined as part of our new Development Grant Assistance Agreement signed with the Government of Kenya on September 12, 2009. The government has participated in the assessment and program design process for the new youth initiative and has provided valuable input. My team and I will contact relevant government ministers to continue discussing how some of this new funding could be used in joint programs to highlight the positive U.S.-Kenyan partnership. As an element of that partnership, we share the objective of helping to empower young people to become responsible citizens in order to help promote the future democratic stability and prosperity of Kenya. A significant part of our program is assisting youth to generate income and opportunities for a career where they can make a positive contribution.

During our meeting, you specifically inquired about an upcoming National Youth Forum meeting to be held November 17 at KICC. As I indicated, we have provided financial support for the holding of that meeting. This meeting is being organized by over 60 youth organizations from across the country to focus on the reform agenda and reconciliation. While we have been in close touch with the organizers, it is the youth organizations who have set the agenda, who have decided who should be invited to participate, and who are organizing the event. I and other diplomatic colleagues, as well as civil society organizations, religious groups, the private sector, and others have been invited to observe the proceedings, but not to participate.

Given the government's commitment to advancing democratic values and reform, the meeting should be a welcome development. I understand that the Minister of Youth and Sports and the Police Commissioner have been invited to

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address the youth meeting. I have been assured that no demonstrations or any other outside activities will take place in connection with the Forum. In that regard, it is my understanding that the Forum will be entirely peaceful and within democratic parameters. When you met with me you raised the concern that troublemakers could seek to disrupt the proceedings. I am sure that appropriate law enforcement authorities will ensure that such outside troublemakers are not allowed to disrupt what, by all indications, will be a model exercise in democracy.

Empowering and enabling young people to channel their energies into peaceful advocacy which respects the democratic system is the best possible way of mitigating against instability or unrest which might grow out of the increasing frustration and cynicism that many youth feel (as documented in Kenyan opinion polls). We see our efforts in Kenya as contributing towards democratic stability, which we value no less than you.

My Government at the highest levels fully supports our engagement with youth, and this letter has specifically been cleared by Washington.

I look forward to continuing to work with all of you to expand and strengthen the bilateral partnership, which is premised on shared democratic values.

End text.
RANNEBERGER